

SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
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GUNNEL CLARK OF SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS

INTERVIEWEE: GUNNEL CLARK

INTERVIEWER: CINDY COLE

SUBJECTS: SWEDEN; MATH AND SCIENCE TEACHER; IMMIGRATION; UNITED STATES; SESAME STREET; DR. GERALD LESSER; BREAST CANCER; WOODWORKING; CANING; KITCHENS; CARPENTRY BUSINESS; ABE OSHEROFF; NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION; RONALD REAGAN; SEATTLE; SEATTLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE; SEATTLE NONVIOLENT OPPONENTS TO WAR; NORTH SEATTLE NEIGHBORS FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE; JANET STECHER; LUTHERAN SERVICES; ADOPTION; SOUTH AFRICA

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is an interview with Gunnel Clark. It is happening in Seattle, Washington on March 24, 2016 and the interviewer is Cindy Cole. Gunnel, why don't you just talk a little bit about your family, when and where you were born. Just go ahead.

[00:00:31] **GUNNEL CLARK:** I was born in Sweden and my father was into plant breeding, finding new varieties of mostly potatoes but also rye and other things. He was second-generation educated—my grandfather was in the same business—but before that, he comes from farmer stock. My mother was an elementary school teacher. Her father, my grandfather, was sea captain. He owned his own ships. So, I come from middle-class

family, I would say. We were five siblings. My brother was the oldest one. I'm in the middle, so one older sister and two younger sisters.

So, maybe talk about my childhood?

[00:02:16] **CINDY:** Yeah, just a little bit, maybe about some of the values perhaps that your family passed on to you.

[00:02:24] **GUNNEL:** I would say that my family values was on the conservative side, particularly my father. He belonged to Högerpartiet, which is the conservative party, which always used to say it was as conservative as George McGovern was. [laughter] Conservatives in Sweden are not very conservative. Now it's a little bit different thing. They are kind of right-wingers in Sweden. I'm sure they were in those days, too, but that was his affiliation. I would go to the youth dances and stuff organized by Högerpartiet.

I'm not sure where my mother was in those days, but I do know that my father was very impressed by [Tage] Erlander, who was the Prime Minister in those days, and Social Democrats. So I know that at the end of his life, he actually voted Social Democrat. But my mother, was she [unintelligible] or not? But she was pretty radical—progressive, not radical. She was progressive in her views, and definitely loved the Social Democrats and what they had done for our country.

I actually remember from my childhood that discussion about universal healthcare, for example. The talk about that the first time it was introduced—I looked up on the Net the other day—was when I was nine years old. Then I think universal healthcare came into being when I was 18, 19.

I think [in] my childhood, I was pretty much of a loner. Part of that was that by the time I was supposed to start school, I could read and write, so they put me in second grade, which is not a great thing to do with a little kid. Because everybody knew each other and I was totally outside. But I became the teacher's pet [laughing] which didn't help. It didn't help.

Eventually, my continued schooling was in [unintelligible] I went to gymnasium. Of course, I took the train, so I was outsider there, too, because everybody else lived in town or had a much shorter commute than I did. I actually had dispensation to come half an hour late every morning, so I missed the morning prayer—which was okay with me. [laughing]

Speaking about that, I came from a very secular home. My parents were not at all religious. My maternal grandparents were churchgoers, and I don't know about paternal grandparents because I never knew them. They were gone by the time I came along.

Before 1959, you had to belong to a church in Sweden. Most Swedish were born into the Lutheran Church. And, of course, the Lutheran Church was the one who kept the books on when you were born, and when you moved out of the town, you had to report to the church and when you died, they recorded you. So you had this fantastic recording way back in Sweden if you want to figure out your family history.

Of course, you could be [Swedish word] . You could belong to another church but you couldn't just [pick things?] out of the Lutheran Church unless you wanted to claim another denomination. In 59, that changed. In our little town of 3,000, my father and my brother's best friend, they went to the [Swedish word] to the offices and exited the church. [laughing] Two people. We don't know about anybody else, but the two of them together. Just a little aside there.

[00:08:22] **CINDY:** I remember you mentioning one time when you were 15 and your father gave you a book.

[00:08:29] **GUNNEL:** A book that had a tremendous influence on the way I was thinking about life and politics. It was called [Swedish name and Swedish author] . [It] was about a man who couldn't read and write—that's what he means—and how he lost his farm because of that; that he was illiterate. Had a great, deep influence on me [in those days?] .

[00:09:20] **CINDY:** I also remember you mentioning one time that your family took in a child.

[00:09:29] **GUNNEL:** Yeah. During the Finnish Winter War, Finland sent many of their children to Sweden for safekeeping. We had a boy, his name was [Eskokari?] . I'm not quite sure how old he was. He probably like 11 or 12, something like that.

This was a national policy, and organized, but I think this boy's father was also a plant breeder—which my father was—in [unintelligible] . I think the arrangement was somewhat private, but we have a piece of paper—we have a document—from the President—are there presidents in Finland?—thanking us, thanking the family for taking care of [Esko] .

That also led to a lot of interchange. [Esko] had two younger sisters and my brother, who was the exchange for [Esko] , had four younger sisters. My brother ended up going to Finland after the wars were all over, and then his two younger sisters came to visit us in turn, exchanging with me and my older sister. And then my two younger sisters got to go Finland in exchange with cousins of these.

Then we lost contact for quite a while, but I understand my brother took up contact with Esko later on in life, and he became a doctor.

[00:11:44] **CINDY:** Why don't you talk a little bit about school, maybe where you went to college.

[00:11:57] **GUNNEL:** We don't have a college. Sweden in those days had elementary school, which was seven years. After five or six years, you would go on to a four-year school called [Swedish word] . And since I had skipped first grade, I still went for fifth grade, so I was at least one year younger than most everybody else in the [Swedish word] . That school was in my hometown, which was a town of like 3,000 people, small town.

After that I went to gymnasium, which is pre-university. What would you call it here? It's between high school and college. In gymnasium, you would sort of choose the direction you wanted to go. You had three options. You could go the mathematical option, or you could go to language, including Latin, or you could go social studies. Now it's different, but that's what it was in those days.

You had nine or 10 subjects that you studied, including [Swedish word] —Christianity. That was always part of the education. You always had a morning prayer in this secular Sweden of yours. [laughing] You had the morning prayer and you studied. Mostly you would study the Bible and very little about other religions really.

I went the mathematical line. Math was my very, very favorite subject. I remember, since I very seldom went out for fun on Saturdays because in my little town of [Swedish town name] there wasn't much fun to be had on Saturdays. My favorite thing was to do math problems. [laughing] Isn't that so sad? If you think about it, it's really sad.

When I finished gymnasium, then you choose your path in life. My father said to me, "You'd better become a teacher because you're not smart enough to go to university." So that's what I did. [chuckles] Like my mother. She was a teacher, too, an elementary school teacher. So, kind of a sad state of affairs.

That was a two-year education. After that, I went out to middle Sweden to [Swedish town] and taught elementary school for two years, and then I taught math for two years, physics and chemistry.

[00:15:57] **CINDY:** Could you talk about that?

[00:15:59] **GUNNEL:** About my math?

[00:16:00] **CINDY:** Yeah, about teaching math.

[00:16:09] **GUNNEL:** I had several classes, but one class in particular was in [Swedish word] , which I talked about the education after elementary school. I got this class that I was warned was a very difficult class. They had actually sent their previous teacher [and] she had a nervous breakdown. The class was 30 students, and half of the class had failed the math the year before.

So, here I am. How old was I? Twenty-one years old, and these kids were like 14. I did have a tough time with them in the beginning. There was especially one girl that was sort of the center—the ringleader—and she had boys around her all the time when I came into the classroom. But whatever happens, I got them on my side, so we started studying seriously. There was a lot to catch up on. Two years later, when they took the test that was sent down from Stockholm, which decided whether they would pass math or not and pass their final exam, nobody failed and half the class was A student, they aced the test. One of the things I’m most proud of.

But part of that story is that the student of mine who had the toughest time, who actually was the only one who squeaked by, his name was [Lars Willihammer?] . After I moved to Seattle, I got this package in the mail. It was [Lars Willihammer’s] doctors dissertation. He invited me to his doctor’s celebration. I found out later this was his second doctorate. One was in education and the other one was in philosophy. And there was a really dedication in the book to me as somebody who had inspired him.

So, I have been in touch with him and actually he organized a class meeting two years ago, so I met some of the old students. He had managed to contact all the survivors—there were six dead among others, [unintelligible] , who was the ringleader of that— which was really pretty fantastic. I went out to [Swedish town name] to the old school town. He hosted me and took me around and we had a lovely time. It was just really quite amazing.

[00:20:07] **CINDY:** Why don’t you talk to me a little bit about your background in music before we go on.

[00:20:16] **GUNNEL:** Not much background, except one thing that I do remember was when we were kids. We would have something called Saturday evenings, especially before Christmastime because we could make a little bit of money to buy Christmas presents for. There were competitions and stuff.

But one thing that he did was sit down at the piano with us girls—my brother was gone—and we were singing. He was one-hand piano. He was not a good piano player, but he played with one hand. That’s one memory I had. We all, I think, had good singing voices and loved to sing.

Then I got piano lessons, so I learned to read music relatively well. That’s really good for me now in Labor Chorus to be able to read the music. I haven’t kept up the piano playing. Part of my education my teacher’s education was to play. So the two years I went to that college, I rented a piano. Had to, it was part of the curriculum. I became relatively proficient, but never felt that I had the talent to play, so gave it up and haven’t played since.

At the teacher's college, there were two choruses, one that everybody was part of—I think it was probably obligatory—and then there was the more advanced chorus that you had to audition for, and I sang alto in that. I've always been alto.

One specific memory I have of singing was when my grandmother was dying. She had a pulmonary embolism and we were called to her bedside. The family assembled and she requested that me and my sisters sing to her, which we did. I think I was 11 and my older sister 13, and my younger sister said she was there, but I don't remember. I sang alto already then, so I must have had some singing experience in school that I don't quite remember.

[00:23:38] **CINDY:** How did you come to go to the United States?

[00:23:43] **GUNNEL:** Oh, adventure. Just looking for adventure. [laughing] My father had been to the United States a couple of times. He went to the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis in his line of research. He always talked so well about the United States, so like "I want to go there."

I made a friend who was one of the teachers in [Swedish]. She had spent a couple of years and she had friends, and they sponsored me. In those days, you had to be sponsored. But Sweden had a big quota, so I got a green card. The mother of one of these people who sponsored me took me in. I stayed with her and I got a job eventually, after six weeks, at the Laboratory of Human Development at Harvard. [chuckles] Through a Danish girl, I got in contact with them. Her professor was doing a research study between adolescents in Denmark and United States, and he was planning to do a similar one with Swedish adolescents.

I was hired to be his research assistant in this study. Then Nixon came to power and the money froze. But then I was there already, so I became the secretary to a Dr. Sheldon White, who was doing research with adolescents. I saw Sesame Street being born there, Dr. [Gerald] Lesser. I would travel to New York every so often to work with, I don't remember the woman's name, and they created Sesame Street. So, when my kids were born, when Lisa was two years, it was the first time they were placed in front of TV to see Sesame Street. Very exciting. I worked there until I got married and pregnant with my first child, which was 67.

[00:26:55] **CINDY:** Then you say something about that you began making things with your hands.

[00:27:08] **GUNNEL:** Yeah, this was during Vietnam War. Political activism was not in my background. That's not something you did, coming from a relatively conservative family. And also in Sweden, you didn't need to be a political activist in Sweden. [laughing] There was the elected officials that did that.

When the kids were small, that was my life. I didn't work, didn't feel like I could work as a teacher in the United States, so I was a mother and a housekeeper. But in 1974, when the kids were five and seven, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. At the very same time, my husband, the girls' father, got a job as the first lawyer at Dartmouth College, so I moved right up to the hospital. He had moved ahead and I was cleaning the house, packing, doing all the things that you have to do when you're going to move. I also had with me one of my nephews from Sweden. But then, of course, I had to take care of the breast cancer, so we chose to do that in our new location.

Then recuperating from the operation, a neighbor told me about a man in neighboring Norwich who loved to have women coming in and work with him. He had a woodwork shop. I contacted him and I went there every morning for about a year. He taught me the elementary things about woodworking tools. In response, I remember he had a whole bunch of chairs that needed caning, so I said, "Show me how to cane and I'll take

care of these chairs.” I did that in return because he didn’t charge anything. He was just a very sweet old man, 85 years old.

But eventually, I didn’t feel like he could teach me any more. He said I was the best student he has ever had. [laughing] When this was happening, I started buying my own tools and working in the basement. The first thing I made for myself was a bed that I still have. Then I made a desk for my husband, and somebody saw that desk and said, “Could you do a desk for me?” Things sort of snowballed and I started doing things for friends, charging them basically what the cost was. [chuckles]

Somewhere along the line, I was unhappy with the kitchen we had. It was in an old house, and I decided that I needed a new kitchen. I contacted a contractor in town who had been a professor at Dartmouth College, and I knew that he employed mostly former students and stuff. I thought, I can probably work in that. I had a feeling that it would be easier for me. [laughing] Hangover from my childhood where the intelligence snobbery of my father that probably made some students [unintelligible] . Oh, thinking about it now, it’s really funny.

I had one agreement with him and he would let me work with the crew and I’d give him the job if he did. He said, “Okay.” I sort of surprised the crew when I turned up in the morning with my carpentry belt and said, “Put me to work.” He had not told them that I was coming. [laughing]

His partner, the co-owner of the company, was the foreman for the crew. A couple of weeks into the process there, he came one morning and said, “I have been so impressed by the work you do, so we want to hire you.” Of course, I was totally surprised, but found myself quickly and said, “Okay, if you pay me \$5.00, and I want to work with your foremost finish carpenter.” He blanched a little bit because \$5.00 is what he paid his best worker, but he came back the next day and said, “How about \$4.50? And yes, you will be able to work with our finish carpenter.”

So, I was hired on after we finished my house. I worked with them for two years, and after two years one of the guys I worked with said, “You know, Gunnell, you’re not paid enough, and you’re skilled enough you should have your own business. Why are you working here? Why don’t you quit? I’ll come with you and work for you.”

So, that’s what I did. Having a husband that was a lawyer, he incorporated me, so at the beginning of my work, I was incorporated, which I dissolved the corporation at the same time I got divorced. [laughing]

I worked in construction. I specialized in kitchens and got jobs through reputation. I got a very good reputation for finishing work when I started it and doing a good job. I had worked in construction 17 years when I moved to Seattle.

[00:35:16] **CINDY:** What brought you to Seattle?

[00:35:19] **GUNNEL:** Well, somewhere along the line, mostly after the breast cancer, it has sort of an ability to turn your life upside down when something like that happens. I had not been super happy in my marriage. I’d been pretty discontent, and I think that sort of blew it out of proportion. Not that he was a bad guy and reacted badly to my operation or anything like that. It’s just that it made me ask myself, is this really what I want out of life? I started seeing therapists, just trying to figure out what’s going on with me. Why was I so unhappy? Because he was really good person. We just didn’t fit.

Then one day I got a call from a friend that said, “I have a friend here who needs to make furniture for his wife. Can he come and use your tools and work in your basement?” I said, “Sure, send him over and I’ll charge him some minor sum for using the tools.” And in steps, [unintelligible] .

It was just like an amazing experience to get to know him. It turns out that his wife had breast cancer, and at the time was dying. So I became part of their support system. She died shortly after. But Abe [Osheroff] would come and make furniture for her in spite of that. He was just very impressive, a very beautiful man.

So, we stayed in touch after she had gone away. She actually came from Seattle, so when she died, he brought her body back to Seattle. Then he came back to pick up his stuff, and we got together and talked and decided to stay in touch. I think basically we fell in love by letter, although I had a very good eye to him already then.
[laughing]

I finally confronted my situation and talked to my husband and said, “I want a divorce.” Abe was sort of the catalyst, I would say. Talking to him, I realized that . . . I remember him saying to me, when I opened up to him about what was going on, he said, “Give yourself a chance to live. This is no life that you have.”

He lived in Venice, California at the time. I went to visit after I had told Cary I wanted a divorce. That’s the start of that second marriage.

[00:39:44] **CINDY:** How did that work out? Did you move out to the West Coast? You still had children, didn’t you?

[00:39:49] **GUNNEL:** No. Something that I loved him for, he said, “I don’t want you to move out to Los Angeles. I’ll move to you, because you should not leave your children.”

I had an agreement with Cary, my ex-husband, the children’s father, that neither of us would move out of the area until the girls were in college, which is what we did. I moved out of Hanover but I was like five minutes away by car. I built my own house. I had gone to a course in architecture at Dartmouth College, so I had learned to do architectural drawings. Made my plans myself and took them to the local office where they approve building plans and got it approved. I had found a beautiful lot on the Connecticut River.

Abe came to help. At the time, I had moved to an apartment. Cary stayed in the house because he just—actually, we had agreed that he would move out but then he said, “I can’t handle moving out,” which was fine with me. I felt since I’m the one who’s breaking up the marriage, it didn’t make sense that he would have to move out.

We started the building and Abe’s two sons—let me backtrack. I hired on a couple of local people to help me with the start and dig the foundation and put the footings in. And the guy who approved my drawings, “When you have the footings in, just contact me and I’ll send somebody out or I’ll come out and approve them before you can continue.”

When that was done, I called the office and they said, “Oh, Mr. So-and-So—” whatever his name was—“he’s out of town.” “For how long?” “He’s on vacation for three weeks.” “Well, who can come and approve?” “There’s nobody else. It’s just him.” And my heart sank. I said, “But I can’t go ahead.” They said, “Well, who is this calling?” I said, “It’s Gunnel Clark.” “Oh, it’s Gunnel Clark. He said before he left, ‘If Gunnel Clark calls, just tell her to go ahead.’” [laughing] I guess he was impressed by my drawings that he figured that I would be honest enough and do the right things.

So, we went ahead. Abe’s two sons came to work with us, and also for a shorter period, his daughter. We built this lovely house on the Connecticut River in New Hampshire.

[00:43:47] **CINDY:** I know that Abe was a real activist.

[00:43:58] **GUNNEL:** Oh, yes.

[00:43:59] **CINDY:** How did that influence you? Do you maybe have some stories?

[00:44:01] **GUNNEL:** It influenced me a lot. Like I said before, being politically active was not in my background. He totally changed me.

First of all, maybe we should say who Abe was. Abe was a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, who fought against Franco in Spain 36 to 39. He came from New York. He was a New York Jew, and had been, very early in life, politically active in New York. The first act of defiance there was to put people back into their apartment after they had been evicted during the crisis in the 1930s.

He was a union organizer and got thrown through plate windows and things like that because he was also very rebellious against the union bosses sometimes, or if it wasn't the bosses, in the mines, which is where he organized. All his life he was extremely active [in pretty much?] every cause that there was in this country. So being married to Abe, you just couldn't stay passive.

My politics had been very progressive all the time. The way I thought about life was definitely more in line with where he was, but I never acted on it in those days. But the first thing we did together was when Abe and I got together in 81, that's when the Contra wars were going on. So the first thing we did was to organize for Abe to go to Nicaragua—he organized and I assisted—and build housing for campesinos as a protest move against the Reagan policies. I was sort of backup, raising money, collecting clothing and other things to send to the campesinos. I also organized a one-week symposium at Dartmouth College, with the help of a Spanish professor there. That was my first political involvement.

[00:47:28] **CINDY:** Did you both continue in your carpentry work also?

[00:47:31] **GUNNEL:** Oh, yeah. I worked as much full-time. That's how I made a living. Abe would be part with me and part in Los Angeles because he still had his business in Los Angeles. He worked mostly for Hollywood folks. Because of his background, he was hot ticket among the progressive community in Los Angeles. Everybody knew him and he could get any work. And up in New Hampshire, maybe then knew of him but it wasn't the same thing, so he came and went.

Eventually he got rid of his apartment in Los Angeles and moved to New Hampshire for good. He was very unhappy in New Hampshire, and that's one reason we moved to Seattle, because a big-city person in a little town like that, he felt totally out of place. And I got tired of listening to his complaints, so I said, "Let's move someplace where you can be happy. Now that the girls are in college, I'm free to move." So, we did. In 89, we came to Seattle.

[00:49:14] **CINDY:** You actually taught classes at the Seattle Community College?

[00:49:17] **GUNNEL:** Yeah. When I came to Seattle, I had worked in construction, I believe, for 17 years. I was pretty much self-taught. The only classes I took was when I started, I took a class at the high school in Hanover and made a cutting board that was all warped. [laughing] And then, of course, the old man who taught me the tools, but otherwise it was all through books and through doing.

I found out when I came here that there was this wonderful school in Seattle. It used to be called Gompers, but it's not PC to call it Gompers anymore because he was somewhat of a . . . well. It's housed in Seattle Central Community College down on King Street. They have a boatbuilding class, they have a cabinet class and they have a construction class. Then they have something called core, which everybody has to go through before you can do any of the other classes, which is basically teaching you the tools and learning the basics, the basics of joinery and stuff like that. I ended up a couple of times substituting for my own teacher in cabinet class, and

then I also taught the core, not during normal school hours but Saturday for the community. So, back to teaching.

[00:51:33] **CINDY:** Why don't you talk a little bit about your activities beginning in 2002, when the drums of war were being beaten.

[00:51:47] **GUNNEL:** We were contacted by a Howard Gale in December 2002. He was telling us about this new organization that was forming in Seattle called SNOW [Seattle Nonviolent Opponents to War] that was organized around protesting the war against Iraq, war in Iraq. Abe had been picked to be the main speaker. Of course, he said, "Yes, thank you very much. I'll come."

At the meeting there, everybody was organized in neighborhoods. I was sitting among North Seattle neighbors, and the group North Seattle Neighbors for Peace and Justice was formed. We all signed on on a piece of paper, and then nothing happened. I went home and it was very quiet and nothing happened. Finally I said—I don't remember, I guess, I took contact with some person who had all their names for North Seattle.

I called around and called a meeting and we met here. We continued to meet here for I don't remember how many years every Saturday morning. Every Saturday morning for a long time. We did a lot of different activities and got speakers in. I don't remember all we did. We stood over I-5 and on Aurora and 100th mostly—I believe it was every Sunday morning—with our signs protesting. It was very, very active. Eventually the whole thing died down, too.

[00:54:14] **CINDY:** How did you come to be in the Labor Chorus?

[00:54:21] **GUNNEL:** Well, how did I not come to be in the Labor Chorus earlier than I did? I've been asking myself that so long, because I love to sing, and I love to sing my politics. I think it's just so amazing to be able to do that. I knew about the Labor Chorus way back, but I guess I didn't quite know about it.

What happened was that there was a pretty active group for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade veterans here in town. It was mostly Bill [Transcriber found this to be Bob] Reed who organized, who was also a veteran. Among other things, he had showed Abe—Abe made a film about his experience and he had showed Abe's film god knows how many times. Actually, that was how Howard Gale knew about Abe, because he had seen the film every time it was shown here, and just admired him tremendously from a distance.

Where was I?

[00:55:42] **CINDY:** You had some connections there that got you into the Seattle Labor Chorus.

[00:55:46] **GUNNEL:** Oh, yeah. This organization had a meeting every year, and at that meeting Janet Stecher and Susan [last name?] would always come and sing. Abe being the person he was, he just glommed onto her and said, "I want to get to know you," which is what he would do very often. We got to know Janet and we invited her to every one of Abe's birthdays. She would come and sing, sometimes with Susan, most of the time without.

I guess I knew through Janet about the Labor Chorus. I had never heard them. Then at Abe's memorial, when he died in 2008, I thought it would be really wonderful to have the Labor Chorus sing at his memorial, being so much—well, he wasn't part of the labor at the end, many of the last years of his life. But part of that was he was kicked out of the Carpenters Union [which number?] [laughing] because he was too much of a rebel. But he was an old union organizer and a strong union man in that regard. He believed strongly in unions.

So, Janet came to sing and the Labor Chorus came to sing, which was fantastic considering that they had to sit through five hours of speeches and all kinds of other things. [laughing] But everybody told me that they didn't mind it.

After Abe's death, I decided to start the Labor Chorus, mostly because I was looking to get out of the house and connecting with more people, trying to stay afloat.

[00:58:14] **CINDY:** Good. Was there anything else that you'd like to add?

[00:58:21] **GUNNEL:** I don't think so. I think we've pretty much covered it all, haven't we?

[00:58:28] **CINDY:** Great. Thank you very much.

[00:58:31] **GUNNEL:** You're very welcome, and thank you.

[END PART ONE/BEGIN PART TWO]

[00:58:37] **CINDY:** This is a continuation of an interview with Gunnel Clark. It is being done in Seattle, Washington On March 24, 2016. The interviewer is Cindy Cole. Go ahead, Gunnel.

[00:58:54] **GUNNEL:** Okay. Abe and I didn't have any children together, but he has his kids and I have my kids and they all get along very well. But one day we got a telephone call from a friend of ours who said, "It's so terrible that all these kids from other countries, they're lingering in jail because they don't have any foster parents. I thought maybe you would be interested."

We contacted Lutheran Services and that resulted in us getting a kid from Honduras. I won't go into details with that. It didn't work out. It was actually a pretty awful experience with this kid, and he ended up not being a very nice person. He's probably right now in jail. He got 10 years.

So we thought, well, this is probably not for us, so we told them that we wouldn't take another child. It was too much. So we got a call from Lutheran Services saying, "Well, how about just a weekend? Because we have a kid here, he and his sister have been in a foster home and it hasn't worked out. We have to replace them. We have a place for the girl to go right away, but the boy, there is a place for him starting Monday." This was a Friday. So we said, "Sure, send him over."

Well, we sat and talked all night, and both Abe and I really fell in love with this kid. He was 15 years old at the time, I believe. Robert Johannes Zulu had grown up in a township outside of Johannesburg. When he was small and his sister was a baby—so he was like two or three—his parents were both killed in a demonstration. They were taken care of by a friend of the parents. A woman took them in and raised them as her own kids. When [Alisa?], the girl, was 11 and Robert was 13, security police came in and killed their mother and set fire to the hut. The girl was at home. Robert was in school. So when he came home, he found his distraught sister and everything else gone.

He said, "I stayed around for the funeral." At some time she had told them that she was not their blood mother, so they knew that. But after the funeral, he took his little sister by the hand and they started walking north. They came to the border of Zimbabwe and was really worried about being caught. There was a market and a woman with several kids and a baby who had been shopping, turned out she lived in Zimbabwe. Robert found that out, so he said to his little sister, "Why don't you go to that woman and ask her to carry the baby." And he himself offered to carry her packages. And they walked across the border.

So to me, it shows how smart he was, how street-smart he was to figure that out. Anyway, so they walked north. According to Robert, they walked for like eight months, all the time worried about getting inducted into one of these—he was knowledgeable enough, he knew history enough, so when they came to Rwanda—back up a little bit. So, how did they feed themselves? I found out much, much, much later that they would do things like killing rats and eating. Some people were nice and took care of them and others, you know. But mostly they stayed off the beaten track to stay out of . . . yeah.

So when they came to Rwanda, they actually reported to the police in Rwanda. He knew that there was a United Nations camp there, so they processed them into the camp. In the camp, they started looking for refugee status, and the question was, where? They wanted to go to Canada, so they looked at Canada.

Eventually, after a long time—I think a couple of years—they were granted refugee status in Canada. Then it was a question of finding a family that would take them in, someone who would take them in. Didn't pan out, so the whole thing fell through after all this work.

In the meantime, Alisa apparently was the only girl in the camp, and for protection she got together with a man who was like 10 years older. She was 14 and I think he was close to 30. Became pregnant. Robert was very upset about her being with a guy because he knew what could happen, and had apparently scolded her and asked her to "Please don't do anything." So, when she did get pregnant, she disappeared with the guy.

In the meantime, new applications had been filed, this time in the United States. And Robert, on his own, started writing. He said he wrote like 200 letters to kings and queens and heads of state and organizations to find refugee status and a place to live. He got one answer, from Lutheran Services in the United States. You can see where it's going.

Word came in from the embassy in the United States that they had been granted refugee status. Where was Alisa? She was called Mary in those days but her real name is Alisa.

But in the meantime with her, the baby was born. Did it all by herself in a bed someplace. When people woke up in the morning, there she was with her baby. She came back, and when they show up at the consulate, I think it was, in Rwanda, Kigale, they said, "Well, you applied for two people and now you're three. Forget it." But they managed to talk them into allowing the baby in, too.

Robert had gotten a response from Lutheran Services, so when they said, "Okay, well, now we have to find a place for you," Robert could say, "That's okay. I have it." They were put on a plane to the United States and ended up with a family here in Seattle. Their first choice, by the way, was Iceland, and then Alaska. [laughing] So then they figured, okay, Seattle will do.

Then you know the rest. It didn't work out. Well, you don't know the rest, I'm sorry. It didn't work out with this other family, so Robert came to us and we took him in. He lived with us here for five years and then he went to school in St. Paul—apparently, I heard later, because he had a little bit of a thing for my youngest daughter, so he chose to be in the same town. But, of course, she had other interests.

Alisa, who didn't know a word of English when she came here—Robert knew a little bit, not much, but he spoke French. They spoke French in Rwanda. She ended up being a poster girl for her high school, and I think they put her through too early because she was not proficient in math and she was not proficient in English when she graduated. But she was such a good role model for what somebody can accomplish—raising a beautiful little son, working hard at school. She was very determined. She took her major core classes in

English and math. She eventually went to Evergreen College, and then she went and got her master's and her doctorate. She's a very accomplished young lady. And he is a computer whiz and doing very well.

[01:11:00] **CINDY:** Do they both live here now, or is he still in St. Paul?

[01:11:04] **GUNNEL:** She lives in Virginia and he is still in St. Paul. But, you know, I talked about this, that one of the things I'm proud of in life is the math class, and this is other one. It feels good to have been able to support two youngsters. He would live with us and she floated, but this was her homebase and she calls me "mom," too. We just didn't feel we could take all three in. It was too much. But I always felt guilty about that, you know. But she's very much in our lives, too.

[01:12:01] **CINDY:** Thank you.

[01:12:02] **GUNNEL:** You're welcome. Thank you.

[END PART TWO]